

Economy: Prison program turns inmate labor into revenue

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Department of Corrections and is set up to be completely self-sustaining. That means that OCE selling products isn't just a matter of preference, but constitutionally mandated.

"The Oregon Constitution states, in part, that 'Prison work products or services shall be available to any public agency ... and shall be used as much as possible ... to support other government operations,'" states a glossy 139-page OCE catalogue.

According to OCE's annual report, the agency generated a record \$28.5 million in revenue in 2017, money that was derived from 10 OCE locations across the state prison system.

OCE sells wood products made at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla, garments sewn at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton, metal products fabricated at a Salem prison, and road signs produced at the prison in Ontario.

OCE spokeswoman Barb Cannard said the Department of Corrections reviews each contract it makes with a pub-

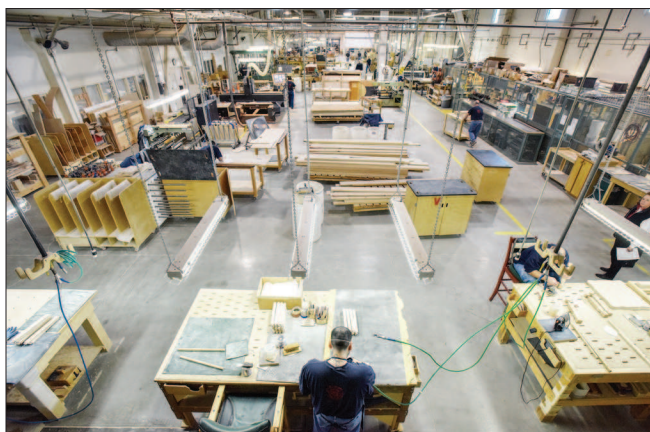
lic or private entity to determine if OCE is competing with an existing vendor or business. She added that OCE has left "millions of dollars" on the table to avoid unfair competition.

Approximately 40 inmates work at the TRCI woodshop, which resembles any other industrial work floor.

During a Monday tour of the facility, inmates worked at stations dedicated to every step of wood furniture production, including computer-assisted drafting, carving, sanding, computer-assisted part manufacturing, varnishing, and upholstery.

Scott Bartholomew, an outside sales manager for OCE, said he viewed his job as "collecting homework" because the products he sells show the quality of the training each inmate receives.

He and OCE coordinator Doug Wilson expounded on the benefits of the woodshop, saying that it provided inmates with real-world experience they can use once they're released and also acted as an incentive for good behavior in TRCI because it's the most desired job at the prison.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Approximately 40 inmates work in the wood shop making furniture for Oregon Corrections Enterprises at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla.

The state refers to any monetary payments prisoners receive for their labor as "awards," which is used to "promote good institutional conduct," according to an OCE issue brief.

Most payments are determined through the Performance Recognition Awards System, which assigns points to prison laborers "based on performance and complexity of the work performed."

PRAS payments cap out at \$82 per month, although prisoners can earn additional

awards if they meet certain measures for performance, safety, or behavior.

A smaller fraction of inmates are eligible for the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program, a program that pays inmates a local prevailing wage when they make products that are sold to private businesses across state lines. Prison Blues at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution is one of the programs eligible for the certification program.

Although inmates who

do work for Prison Blues are paid wages similar to garment workers on the outside, they don't take home most of their awards.

Only 20 percent of the certification program award is available to the inmate for discretionary spending. The rest is split between taxes, child support, victim restitution, and program costs.

PRAS is subject to its own deductions as well, including 10 percent for court-ordered financial obligations, 5 percent for a general victims fund, and 5 percent toward a transitional savings account that's accessible after release.

In total, Oregon Department of Corrections inmates under OCE were awarded \$2.7 million in 2017. That figure was calculated after the certification program deductions but before the PRAS deductions.

Given that 1,419 inmates worked in OCE programs, prisoners earned an average of \$1,902 per year.

Although private vendors wouldn't be able to pay an employee \$82 or less per month for their labor, Cannard said businesses don't have to

account for the security and staffing that comes with running the OCE program.

Although Pendleton staff said the city got a good deal for the fire department furnishings, Cannard said OCE isn't always the lowest cost option and the organization commonly loses contracts to private companies with lower bids.

But Kelly Simon, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon, said the reason Pendleton got a "screaming good deal" was because of the prison labor system's exploitative practices.

Simon said that although the ACLU can appreciate the training inmates receive and the contributions they make to the community through prison labor programs, the low pay and various deductions means inmates are returning to their communities "penniless" once they're released.

Regardless of the politics behind it, the furniture for the new Pendleton fire station will be manufactured at the Two Rivers Correctional Institution and furnish the new facility when it opens next year.

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Jobs: Winter brings more demand for temporary employment

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job-seekers than openings.

Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers from 2017 state that of a workforce of 36,924 in Umatilla County, 35,139 people were employed.

Express, a national service with multiple branches in Oregon, is one of a few staffing agencies in Umatilla County. Other employment services include Worksource Eastern Oregon, which includes some public and private agencies, as well as some agricultural staffing agencies like Atkinson Staffing.

Connell said Express currently has about 213 active associates and about 53 business clients to whom they supply workers. Clients include large manufacturers as well as small companies with just two or three clients. About 75 percent of their clients are businesses that involve some sort of physical labor, like manufacturing, agriculture, construction or food processing. The other 25 are administrative roles, including office jobs with agricultural or manufacturing companies.

During a conversation that usually lasts no more than an hour, employment

specialists will find out as much as they can about the person's desired job, such as minimum pay, how much they want to work and how far they're willing to commute — Express covers clients in Umatilla and Morrow counties. They discuss the person's skills, things they do or don't want to do, and their work history. Applicants are given a conditional offer of employment with Express, which then seeks out jobs for them.

The employee's relationship with Express could last anywhere from a few months to several years.

"Some associates only want temp work," Connell said. "Some client partners don't ever hire our employees, and they keep them on our payroll forever."

Some associates have done temp work through the agency for two or three years, Connell said.

With lower unemployment numbers, the applicant pool gets less varied, said Connell, and they see more applicants with the same skill sets.

"The types of people we're seeing, we already have 20 just like them," she said. "Maybe they're entry-level, not a lot of skills."



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Maintenance supervisor David Pichuskie replaces a light bulb in a security light at the Boardman Trails Apartments on Thursday in Boardman.

Skills, she said, can include forklift operators or

refrigeration technicians, or someone with office skills,

like bilingual administrative assistants.

"Those people aren't necessarily looking for work, they're already employed," she said.

The average wage for jobs through Express is currently \$15.09 an hour, Connell said.

The majority of the associates who come in seeking jobs are recently laid off or have just moved to the area, but there are a few retired people who will take seek out temp jobs, looking for variety.

David Pichuskie is one of those people. The Stanfield resident was an associate of Express Employment services for nearly two years, working temporary jobs around Umatilla County before settling on a permanent job this summer, managing apartment complexes for Umatilla County Housing Authority.

Those temp jobs included working as a flagger with the railroad, filling out orders and distributing food for CAPECO, and driving a forklift for Dupont Pioneer.

Pichuskie had owned a business for several years, but when he retired, he wanted something that would allow him some

flexibility.

"I don't think I've turned down any job," he said, adding that he's enjoyed most of the work, though there are a few jobs he'd prefer not to do again.

"Like emptying a rail car filled with coal dust — by hand," he said.

Pichuskie said the range of jobs taught him about dealing with different industries, as well as Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines.

"You learn a lot when you're bouncing from place to place," he said.

Pichuskie said people who want to keep working have to be willing to broaden their scope.

"You've got to not refuse to do jobs," he said.

Connell said the biggest reason that Express would not make a conditional offer of employment is if the person's specifications are too narrow — they may not have jobs that meet those requests.

"Someone might want to make \$70,000 a year," she said, "but if they're not willing to budge on that, we most likely would stop the interview, and tell them we'll keep their information, but we just don't have jobs that meet your specifications."

Bill: Farm bill signed without SNAP controls

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adults ages 18-49 without children are required to work 20 hours a week to maintain their SNAP benefits. The House bill would have raised the age of recipients subject to work requirements from 49 to 59 and required parents with children older than 6 to work or participate in job training. The House measure also sought to limit circumstances under which families that qualify for other poverty programs can automatically be eligible for SNAP.

None of those measures made it into the final farm bill despite Trump's endorsement. Now the administration is using regulatory rulemaking to try to scale back the SNAP program.

Work-eligible able-bodied adults without dependents, known as ABAWDs, can currently receive only three months of SNAP benefits in a three-year period if they don't meet the 20-hour work requirement. But states with an unemployment rate of 10 percent or higher or a demonstrable lack of sufficient jobs can waive those limitations.

States are also allowed to grant benefit extensions for 15 percent of their work-el-

igible adult population without a waiver. If a state doesn't use its 15 percent, it can bank the exemptions to distribute later, creating what Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue referred to as a "stockpile."

The USDA's proposed rule would strip states' ability to issue waivers unless a city or county has an unemployment rate of 7 percent or higher. The waivers would be good for one year and would require the governor to support the request. States would no longer be able to bank their 15 percent exemptions. The new rule also would forbid states from granting waivers for geographic areas larger than a specific jurisdiction.

Perdue said the proposed rule is a tradeoff for Trump's support of the farm bill, which Trump signed Thursday.

"I have directed Secretary Perdue to use his authority to close work requirement loopholes in the food stamp program," Trump said at the signing ceremony. "That was a difficult thing to get done, but the farmers wanted it done, we all wanted it done, and in the end, it's going to make a lot of people happy."

Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi on Thursday

slammed the Trump administration's efforts to restrict SNAP.

"Why at Christmas would you take food out of the mouths of American people?" she said.

The USDA in February solicited public comment on ways to reform SNAP, and Perdue has repeatedly voiced support for scaling back the program.

The Trump administration's effort, while celebrated by some conservatives, has been met with criticism from advocates who say tightening restrictions will result in more vulnerable Americans, including children, going hungry.

A Brookings Institution study published this summer said more stringent work requirements are likely to hurt those who are already part of the workforce but whose employment is sporadic.

House Agriculture Chairman Michael Conaway, R-Texas, was the primary champion for tighter SNAP work requirements in the House farm bill and remained committed to the provision throughout negotiations.

Conaway praised the rule Thursday for "creating a roadmap for states to more effectively engage

ABAWDs in this booming economy."

Conaway in September blasted the Senate for refusing to adopt work requirements and suggested that Perdue doesn't have the authority to make broad changes to the SNAP program.

"The Senate seems to have abandoned the idea that it is Congress' responsibility to fix the waiver issue and that somehow Secretary Perdue could wave a magic wand and fix that. It's not his responsibility; he does not have the authority," Conaway said in an interview with Pro Farmer, a trade publication.

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